

AICTE as Politicians' Handmaiden

Some recent decisions of the All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) in regard to engineering courses in Maharashtra make it clear that it is as easy to bring pressure on so-called all-India bodies as on state ones. Further, any set of rules can be readily subverted to suit the interests of those who matter and officials of bodies like the AICTE and universities and colleges who are responsible for maintaining standards in higher education willingly default on their responsibilities to accommodate the powerful and the influential.

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The All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), a supervisory body of the central government, was formed about 15 years back supposedly to ensure proper standards of imparting technical education in the country. Such a supervisory body was considered essential because there exist many locally strong political and social pulls and pressures on universities and colleges which frequently work against the standards of higher technical education. It was thought that an all-India body would also keep in line the numerous education shops that have sprung up in many states such as Maharashtra, Karnataka and others. In these states, locally powerful politicians have discovered a very lucrative, totally risk-free, low-investment, high-return, money-making avenue in the guise of engineering colleges. By retaining effective control over admissions to these institutes and taking full advantage of the loopholes in the various reservation rules and the system of quotas, an alert and resourceful college management could and did make money hand over fist in every admission season.

In the current academic year, already half over, the entire admissions procedure for the FY engineering class in Maharashtra was repeatedly thrown out of gear because of changes and modifications in the rules even after the admissions were almost complete. The last postponement was caused by the action of the AICTE itself when, violating its own guidelines, it allowed two new institutes in the state to take in fresh students even after admissions were

completed and the new term was already launched. As it happens, these two institutes are run by two politicians currently in power in the state. The teaching for the first term thus began almost about the time when the first term should have concluded. The first term, normally of 16 weeks, has therefore been extended till January 15, 2001. But even this extension will not make up for all the lost weeks and would only partly cover the loss of teaching to the new students. Neither the academic authorities nor the educational barons who control the engineering colleges in Maharashtra were perturbed in any way at this loss to the students and to education.

But that was not the last word on the matter. Just when teachers and the students were getting used to the idea of a truncated academic year and the watered down first year foundation courses for the new engineering students, the AICTE came up with another gift to the many educational barons in Maharashtra. Late in November, that is when normally the second term of the students should begin, it bestowed upon numerous institutes another gift in the form of an additional 2,500 seats for starting more divisions in FY Information Technology. "In the larger interests of the country and of the students" these seats were also made effective from the current academic year itself. As it happened, while serving the 'larger national interest', the college managements also managed to squeeze in additional admissions and additional revenue in the current academic year itself. That this was grossly against academic standards and the real interests of the students themselves obviously did

not enter the collective mind of the AICTE and the Maharashtra education authorities. Their latest action will ensure that the admissions process this academic year will easily run till January 2001. That is, when most students are normally busy preparing for their final exams. But thanks to the AICTE and the educational authorities of Maharashtra, students will still be worrying about admissions to their desired courses at that time.

Once again, the academics, principals of the colleges concerned and the university authorities have chosen to look the other way when faced with yet another gross distortion of the academic calendar and consequent loss to students. The AICTE cannot be unaware of the acute shortage of space, laboratories, workshops and, most important, of teachers that already prevails in most of the engineering colleges. One cannot just conjure up about a hundred new teachers (at the least) in Information Technology who will be needed if any justice is to be done to the fresh batches of students. Yet not only the AICTE but the educational authorities in the state, including the chancellor and the various vice-chancellors, have chosen to keep mum about this callous disregard of vitally important inputs.

Mercifully, the proposed new round of admissions has been temporarily stayed by the courts. But the complaint to the court is made not on grounds of the complete anti-academic nature of the expansion of some engineering colleges without proper infrastructure and at a totally wrong time. In a telling commentary on the current state of educational administration in the state, the complaint is filed not by any teacher or student or a vice-chancellor, but by the management of an institute left out of the bounty of additional seats proffered by the AICTE to selected institutes. Evidently, there are some institutes which feel aggrieved that they are denied their fair share in the latest pickings.

The academic record in the past few years of the majority of the institutes which are to be rewarded with expansion now is not exactly scintillating. In the area of Mumbai University alone, there are over half a dozen institutes whose pass percentage is hovering around 25 per cent or less. The record of many institutes in smaller towns is much worse. If it was truly concerned about improving standards, the AICTE could with greater profit investigate the working of these institutes and compel them to take remedial action. But

then they are all run by locally powerful persons.

It is also worthwhile to keep in mind that the existing engineering colleges in Maharashtra are not able to fill all their existing seats in the FY class with local students. It is reported that there were no takers from local students for over 5,000 seats after a few rounds of admissions and these seats were filled by taking in students from other states and from the wards of the NRIs. To be sure, this did not hurt the economics of running the colleges. Quite the contrary. In the same way, the addition of another 2,500 seats to these colleges is not going to do them any harm budgetwise. No wonder the institutes actively worked for opening up the admissions procedure one more time during the current academic year itself, rather than wait a few more months. No one would want to see one season of admissions lie fallow. If, in the process, the students get less than their normal quota of teaching, why, they must be ready to make that sacrifice “in

the larger interests of the country”.

If nothing else, the past few weeks have made a few things clear. One, it is as easy to bring pressure on so-called all-India bodies as it is on state bodies. Second, any set of rules can be easily subverted by persons in authority to suit the interests of people who matter. Three, bodies such as AICTE and universities and colleges and their officials who are supposed to strive for improving educational standards or at least maintaining them, are quite happy to give a back-seat to their primary responsibilities to accommodate short-term interests of influential individuals in the name of the ‘larger national interests’. Four, no one from the official educational establishment is ready to take a stand against the efforts of the official bodies, when they willingly serve as a tool of powerful individuals. It is said that a social system or organisation is doomed if it cannot take self-correcting steps. The system of higher education in India has surely reached that stage in its evolution for quite some time now. **EPW**